

Days Are Forgotten

by Savva

Even the strongest of us need help sometimes, and occasionally, while helping others, we actually helping ourselves.

One

Chapter 1 of 1

Even the strongest of us need help sometimes, and occasionally, while helping others, we actually helping ourselves.

Prompt: #53. After finally finishing her studies at Hogwarts, Hermione gets her much-wanted job in the Being Division of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. She often has to work with the Office of Misinformation, which Lucius Malfoy became the Head of after the war (maybe he 'bought' his position?), only this is where trouble strikes. In every area of her life, Hermione is confident and in control, except whenever she sees Lucius Malfoy, she finds she can't do anything but stutter (perhaps related to her time in Malfoy Manor? Maybe it's even the same when she meets Draco and Narcissa too?). Lucius finds it amusing at first, frustrating Hermione further, but over time a relationship develops, and they go from cordial to polite to something more. (Maybe Lucius wants to help rid Hermione of her stutter? Maybe he feels responsible?) **Prompt submitted by:** scarletlady

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Days Are Forgotten*

You say I'm old hat

A fucking dirty rat

Call me a cliché

*How right you are**

Monday

It was just another Monday in the Ministry. Lucius Malfoy was unhurriedly making his way through a frantic morning crowd, methodically avoiding particularly congested corridors. His face bore a displeased, haughty expression, even though he didn't really feel any more irate than usual, if at all. In the past, when he had deemed himself superior to the mere wizards and witches around him, they had indeed annoyed him. Those days were long gone and forgotten, though. Three years in Azkaban had taken care of that petty delusion quite splendidly, and nowadays, that expression on his face was just a comfortable mask. He was used to it.

To be honest, unlike most of the people rushing to their offices alongside him, Lucius couldn't even claim that he detested Mondays. As he hadn't had a need to work earlier in life, he'd never acquired the common aversion to that day of the week. Mondays hadn't been of any significance for him until much later, after his release from Azkaban, when one of his parole requirements happened to be a three-year period of obligatory work for the Ministry. He had expected that he would start to dislike them then, and yet he hadn't. On the contrary, if anything, he disliked Saturdays and Sundays the most.

With Narcissa gone for good he couldn't really blame her for divorcing him and Draco almost never visiting, his weekends had been bleak at best. For years, the only bright spots in his existence had been his meetings with Severus, though since Miss Parkinson had decided to take her former professor as a lover, even those had become rather rare. Hence, instead of Mondays, Lucius came to hate weekends, holidays ... and above all, his loneliness. That vile, soul-eating creature he truly loathed.

He wasn't made for seclusion. He had never considered himself an introverted lone wolf like Severus, for instance. He loved being married, he liked company, and he enjoyed a nice, stimulating conversation now and then. Alas, most of those weren't part of the equation for him any more. It was his own fault, mind you, and he knew it. Nevertheless, after spending his weekends alone and in silence, apart from Wrinkly's asinine blabbering, Lucius enjoyed his Monday mornings at the Ministry with its busy, motley crowd bustling around him. He felt ... if not needed, then, at least, alive.

He made it to the fourth level and stepped into his office right at the eighth stroke of the clock. The Office of Misinformation, of which he had been the head for two years, was located at the end of the corridor and consisted of one medium-sized room filled with seemingly endless rows of filing cabinets. He could still remember how disappointed he had been on his first day of work, five years ago. Somehow, he had foolishly believed that the Office of Misinformation ought to be an extraordinary, and perhaps even glamorous, place to work. After all, he had grown up with stories about its Head's being in regular communication with the Muggle Prime Minister practically on a regular basis.

Well, he couldn't have been more wrong, as there wasn't anything remotely glamorous in the job. Right on his first day, he had learnt that his supervisor, Henrik Peterssen, who had been the Head of the office for seventy-eight years, hadn't seen the Prime Minister even once. That was the prerogative of the Minister for Magic. In fact, the Head of the Office was its only employee. Moreover, Henrik didn't really need an assistant, and Lucius suspected that he had agreed to take him just because the legend of the Wizarding World himself had asked.

In the end, it didn't matter, and while Potter clearly had done it only because of Draco, Lucius was grateful nevertheless. Anything was better than Azkaban. Anything.

Lucius and Henrik had managed to find an equilibrium pretty quickly and worked together without any problems. After Lucius had worked his way through countless documented accidents, he became quite brilliant at his job. Henrik came to appreciate his uncanny ability to come up with a plausible explanation for nearly anything, and it was only logical that, after Lucius' parole had ended, he continued working.

Two years ago, after celebrating his one hundred and fifth birthday, Henrik had decided to retire and had asked him to take over his position. Lucius had gladly agreed, and surprisingly despite Draco and Severus' doubts Kingsley Shacklebolt (our beloved Minister, as Lucius called him) had signed the papers. Perhaps it had been Potter's doing again, but Lucius didn't dwell on that much. His pride was rather fragile these days and didn't need any more blows. Besides, he was fairly pleased with his position, and that was what counted.

Slowly making it to his desk his knee bothered him in that fickle early-spring weather Lucius checked the post, though he knew that nothing urgent had happened during the weekend. One of the parchments drew his attention, and he sat down to read. It was an announcement that Hermione Granger had been appointed as the Head of the Being Division. That poor Division had been withering without proper supervision for about a year now, as no one was enthusiastic (or foolish) enough to take on so enormous a task. Lucius chuckled, *No one but Hermione Granger, of course.*

He hadn't heard much about Miss Granger after the war. He had done his best to steer clear of the famous trio after Azkaban, even though it wasn't easy, taking into account that Draco and Harry had been an item for the last six years. Fortunately, Potter wasn't too eager to socialise with him, either. Now, though ... Lucius tried to gauge how the news of Hermione Granger working in the same department could affect him. As far as he knew, it shouldn't. He rarely interacted with that particular division. The majority of his work came from the Aurors.

Usually, it was they who sought his services in cases where a simple Obliviation wasn't enough, and a more elaborate cover-up was needed.

"It will be fine," he muttered to himself and glanced at the clock. It was only ten minutes after eight. He still had twenty minutes before their all-divisions meeting, which was customary on Mondays. *Ah*, he thought, *just enough time for a nice cup of Earl Grey.*

Twenty minutes later, he was seated in the big oval room, discreetly eyeing Miss Granger, while the Head of the Department, Neill Scamander, was drivelling about the new horizons which surely would open for them with her on board, or something to that effect. Lucius never paid attention to Neill's verbose speeches; in general, he found those meetings boring and useless. But he didn't feel inclined to advise or complain and usually entertained himself by inconspicuously solving the newest crossword under the pretence of making notes.

Today, however, he had a much more interesting distraction, of which he took full advantage, as Miss Granger was surprisingly easy on the eyes. She was, of course, listening to Neill's words very carefully, at times enthusiastically nodding her agreement with the points he was making, causing her mahogany curls to bounce and flutter around quite attractively. Her brown eyes, which seemed a little too big for her small face, were focused on Neill, and she kept chewing on the tip of her quill, temptingly pouting her bright-pink lips. Her simple white shirt was nicely fitted, and Lucius found himself gazing at her soft form appreciatively. He also noticed that, instead of being manicured, her fingers were covered with ink stains. At first, that detail made him chuckle, but then it reminded him of Draco as a child, and his mood took a sudden plunge into melancholy.

Losing interest in studying Miss Granger, Lucius sighed and wished that this tortuously long meeting would come to an end, which it presently did. At the conclusion, Neill and Miss Granger stood by the door for a personal introduction to the heads of each office and division. Wanting to be done with it as soon as possible, Lucius stood up and walked to them wearing his most friendly smile. Alas, the Head of the Beast Division cut ahead of him, and he had to wait and listen to his ridiculous fawning.

When it was finally his turn, he didn't bother to don a friendly mask again. He just stepped closer and, fixing his eyes on her, said, "Congratulations, Miss Granger," with his habitual coldness. Perhaps, although unintentionally, he allowed his annoyance to ooze into the words.

As soon as her eyes met his, Miss Granger's face went significantly whiter, but she still smiled and opened her mouth to reply. "M... m... m....," she stammered and her eyes opened wider in alarm. She took in a quick breath and tried again. "M... m ... Mister M... m ... m ... m." She fell silent, looking distraught.

Noticing something odd, Neill patted her shoulder and said, "It's all right, Miss Granger. We all get nervous on our first day. Just take a deep breath and try again."

Her struggles were painful to watch, but Lucius couldn't tear his eyes from her panicked face. He had seen that expression before. Reminded of the past he had tried so hard to forget, he too drew a deep breath. Neill's words did nothing to soothe Miss Granger, as she frantically gasped for air. Unnerved, Lucius tried to school his features into a friendlier expression, but it was too late. The poor girl shook her head and rushed from the room without a word. Neill shrugged his shoulders, said, "Nerves," and declared the meeting adjourned.

That bizarre incident haunted Lucius for the rest of the day. He was a former Death Eater, a convicted felon. Everything *everything* would be blamed on him, even something as trivial as Miss Granger's stammering. He just knew it. By six o'clock, he felt so worried it wasn't even amusing. His nerves weren't the same anymore, and he was too easily agitated. Somehow, he had managed to convince himself that he was about to lose his job, and he truly didn't want that to happen. Hence, when he stumbled upon Miss Granger in the lift as it happened, they were the only passengers he decided to seize the opportunity and offer his sincere apologies for frightening her.

"Miss Granger," he said, and she gave him a startled glance. "Please allow me to apologise." She interrupted him by drawing her breath sharply. Then she opened her mouth and ... failed to produce any discernible sounds at all. Visibly frustrated, she opened and closed her mouth a few more times and then ran in defeat the minute the doors of the lift had opened, leaving Lucius even more troubled.

He kept thinking about those two encounters over dinner. Was Miss Granger's reaction to him an echo of that infamous incident at the Manor? The war had ended eight years ago, and he just couldn't imagine it was so fresh for her. If it was, though, what would be his best course of action? Should he try to apologise again? Or stay away and lie low for a while?

He was still contemplating the situation, when his Floo suddenly lit up and Draco stepped into his living room.

"Draco, what a nice surprise," Lucius said, genuinely glad to see his son. He saw him so rarely nowadays that it was hard to keep his nonchalant façade.

"Father," Draco said, and gave him a curt nod, his face tight.

Sensing that it wasn't a visit of courtesy, Lucius sighed. "Is something the matter, son?" he asked, though he could already guess. In the Ministry, rumours spread with lightning speed.

"What happened between you and Granger?" Draco said, and Lucius thought that six years of living with a Gryffindor had clearly rubbed off on him.

"Your lack of subtlety is unbecoming," he remarked wearily.

"Answer the question, father. I don't have time for your snotty rubbish."

Lucius stood up and walked to a cabinet. "I don't know what to tell you," he said, pouring himself a glass of Firewhisky. "It seems that Miss Granger has some kind of adverse reaction to my presence. Alas, I cannot offer you any plausible explanation, as it eluded me at the time. Perhaps you can ask Miss Granger yourself." He took a sip of his drink and added dryly, "She probably sees you more often than I."

"I saw Granger today, father," Draco stated. "And even though she didn't say anything, the whole Ministry knows that you bullied her into stuttering."

"I did no such thing. You must know better than to believe those rumours." Lucius sank heavily into his armchair.

"Must I now?" said Draco. "It doesn't matter. Just so you understand, if this problem persists, you'll lose your job. If you want to keep your position, you need to fix it as quickly as possible."

Irritated, Lucius huffed. "How, for Merlin's sake, am I supposed to fix it? If you must know, I tried, and it made the whole situation even worse. I may very well stay away from Miss Granger altogether."

"You work in the same department, father," Draco commented. "You have at least two meetings a week together. How exactly are you going to avoid her?" Lucius didn't answer and continued sipping his drink. "Besides, you don't really need to work. You have enough money. Why are you still working?"

"I'm not obliged to explain my motives to you," said Lucius coldly. "Moreover, I am fairly certain that you and Mr Potter are mistaken about this whole situation. Perhaps Miss Granger just had an extreme case of nerves. As far as I know, females are susceptible to such things."

"This isn't just any regular female. It's Hermione Granger." Draco rolled his eyes. "Fix it, father, or quit." With that, he strode into the fireplace and left without a good-bye. Lucius sighed and finished his drink in one go.

Perhaps it was time to start hating Mondays.

Consequences

On Tuesday morning, the Ministry met him with whispers and sidelong glances. The last time it had been that bad was five years ago, when he had just started working. Lucius did his best to ignore the heaviness in the air. Still, despite his efforts, it grated on his nerves, and by the end of the day he felt utterly distraught. Condemning those blasted Ministry fools, himself and Miss Granger, he couldn't even enjoy his apéritif that evening, let alone dinner.

The axe fell on Wednesday, when Lucius was called to the Head's office. Leaning on his cane, he slowly walked through the corridors, thinking that he had never been called on the carpet before, and prepared himself for bad news. By the time he reached the door, he was ready. After all, Neill wasn't nearly as intimidating as one of Lucius' previous ... supervisors.

Neill was uncharacteristically straightforward, this time. He started by saying, "Lucius, old chap." Lucius cringed at this undue familiarity. "It seems that you've got yourself in a bit of a pickle. I've just been talking to Shacklebolt ..." Neill made a dramatic pause, and Lucius had to suppress the urge to roll his eyes. "Don't get me wrong; I don't think it's entirely your fault, but tomorrow, at the meeting, Miss Granger will present her first report. I don't want her to stammer, you know. So I'm afraid you will have to refrain from attending our morning meetings. It's just for the time being. I'm sure, in a few weeks, she will feel more comfortable."

Lucius silently nodded and turned to leave.

"Don't be alarmed, Lucius. You're good at what you do, and no one is going to take your position," Neill called after him, "at least not yet."

Closing the door, Lucius swore under his breath. Ironically, he had wished to be excused from those meeting many times in the past. Now, however, when he actually was, it didn't feel good at all.

It could have been worse, he told himself on his way back to his office. He wasn't fired, at least not yet. Regardless, he needed to see Severus, preferably tonight.

Six hours later, he was sitting in a ratty old armchair. Watching Severus pacing the floor, Lucius was seriously contemplating the likelihood that one of the coils in that petty excuse for a piece of furniture might poke a hole in his robes, in which case his rear end would definitely sustain a serious injury.

"Can you request an audience with her?" Severus asked, momentarily lingering in the farthest, darkest corner of the room.

"I can ask, though I doubt that I'll get one," Lucius replied gruffly.

"Hmm." Severus hummed and returned to his pacing. "Talk to her during lunch then," he said eventually, stopping and looking down his enormous nose at Lucius.

"You know I don't use the Ministry canteen. I was advised against using it, as you probably remember."

"That was five years ago. I'm sure you can use it now. Miss Granger is a reasonable enough witch. Maybe, if she can explain what is happening, you two will somehow resolve the problem."

Lucius grunted and shifted in his chair. "Do you think a potion might help?" he said.

Severus shook his head. "I've never heard of such a potion. I need more information, but if it's some kind of post-traumatic condition, I won't be able to help. You know better than anyone that those hidden psychological scars are the toughest to treat."

Lucius sighed and nodded. He did know that better than anyone. "Can it be something simple? My attire, for instance," he muttered, looking at his dark-grey cashmere robes. "Perhaps I should wear something lighter so as not to remind her of that ... unfortunate incident at the Manor. What do you think?"

"Perhaps." Severus glanced at him sceptically. "Whatever it is, you have to talk to her first."

Lucius closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. "I'm not sure that she would be able to talk." He sprang up and began to pace in front the fireplace. "The whole situation is idiotic. How it managed to spin out of control that quickly is beyond me."

Severus cleared his throat. "It's Hermione Granger we're talking about, Lucius."

"Yes, I'm painfully aware of that fact, thank you for reminding me. But, for Merlin's sake, it's been only three days. I'm not even sure it's my fault. Maybe the blasted witch is suffering from some kind of jinx."

Severus poured a glass of Firewhisky and thrust it into his hand. "I fail to see why you are so shocked. Did you expect anything else from those nitwits at the Ministry?"

Lucius shrugged.

"Try to meet with her tomorrow," Severus spoke again. "Take a parchment with you, in case she can't talk."

"Don't patronise me," Lucius grumbled.

"I was under the impression that that was the reason for your visit, to be patronised," Severus retorted. "And you know me, I strive to please."

Lunch

The next day, Lucius, wearing unseasonably light-grey robes and feeling daft, entered the Ministry's canteen at the time assigned for their department. Fortunately, the hall wasn't too crowded, and he spotted Miss Granger almost at once. She was alone. She was immersed in a book, and a cup of cold tea and a plate with an untouched, objectionable-looking pastry stood abandoned on the table.

Focusing his grey eyes on his target, Lucius strode toward her. "Good afternoon, Miss Granger," he drawled in the softest baritone he could muster, eyeing her mahogany mane and purposely ignoring the sudden silence around them as dozens of eyes began to burrow holes in his back. Miss Granger tilted her head up, and Lucius braced himself for another startled expression, but after her initial wariness had ebbed, she surprised him with a smile. It was small and tight, but a smile nevertheless. Encouraged, he said, "May I?" gesturing at an unoccupied chair, and she nodded, closing her book.

Sitting down, Lucius cleared his throat and started with, "Miss Granger, please allow me to apologise once again for causing you, though unwittingly, any discomfort. I..."

Miss Granger interrupted him by touching the sleeve of his robe and breathing out, "D... don't."

Caught off guard, Lucius fell silent, staring at her.

She inhaled and tried to speak. "M... m... m...." When that didn't work, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "It's not your fault," she finally managed.

Lucius glanced at her sceptically. "It's not?"

"W... well, n ... not entirely." That sentence came out of her mouth fairly struggle-free, and she grinned. Her smile, however, quickly faded when she noticed the dead silence around them, and the fact that every pair of eyes in the room was locked on their table. "C... can we m... m... m....," she began, but, unable to finish, uttered a frustrated "ugh" instead.

Lucius, inwardly thanking Severus, pushed a piece of parchment and a pencil to her. "Here."

She flashed him an appreciative glance and wrote,

Can we meet after work? Let's say, six o'clock, Main Hall. I need to talk to you, and preferably without everyone counting how many times I stuttered.

Lucius nodded. "Of course. I meant to ask the same thing."

Glancing at the clock, she stood up, picked her book and, giving him another quick smile, said with surprising ease, "Good, thank you." He watched her leave the canteen with her head high and all her posture indicating that she didn't give a damn.

"Cheeky witch," he said to himself. Suddenly, he felt much better. Standing up, he gazed around him, forcing all the spectators to avert their eyes, removed an imaginary piece of lint from his sleeve, and in his turn, left the canteen.

Meeting

At twenty minutes to seven, they were sitting in a small, charming café called 'Bel Ami' with two cups of cappuccino, accompanied by various pastries that Miss Granger found appealing.

It had taken him hours to figure out what would be the best venue for their meeting. He didn't want to seem presumptuous by taking her to dinner at some stuck-up restaurant he had frequented in the past. It had to be something casual, but not cheap or crowded, and preferably Muggle, as he didn't want any prying eyes following their every move. After agonising for what seemed like centuries, he was about to give up, when his subconscious reminded him of that pastry on Miss Granger's plate at lunch, and an idea struck him.

About three years ago, he had been called to Bel Ami for an emergency cover-up when Ginevra Weasley had almost destroyed the place after her then beau Dean Thomas had upset her. As always, Lucius had come up with a perfect solution: he had made the Muggles believe that the wiring on the wall had been too old and had caused a small fire. Luckily, Bel Ami had recovered splendidly, and he had visited the place on several occasions. To be honest, he had grown rather fond of their pastries, which explained why his trousers felt a bit tight these days. Now, watching Miss Granger's excitement at a mini-éclair, Lucius inwardly congratulated himself on his choice. It was especially agreeable, because the light café atmosphere seemed to have had a calming effect on Miss Granger's stuttering.

For the last forty-five minutes, they had managed to communicate almost normally, resorting to writing on parchment only a few times. As 'm' turned out to be the most difficult sound for Miss Granger to produce, Lucius proposed that they drop the formalities and switch to their first names. The absence of 'Mister Malfoy' made their conversation flow much more smoothly, and Hermione was able to explain to him that she had already had a consultation with a Muggle specialist, who had told her that she was dealing with so-called *psychogenic stuttering*, probably due to an unaddressed post-traumatic stress disorder.

Lucius couldn't claim that he fully understood everything Hermione said. However, he did catch the main idea. "If I have understood correctly, then your sudden onset of stuttering is not my fault?" he asked, watching her intently.

"Well, n... no."

He let out a sigh of relief and muttered, "Thank Mer..."

"B... but," Hermione lifted her forefinger. "You d... definitely t...t...triggered it, or your facial expression, t... to be exact."

Guilt-ridden, Lucius reached over the table and covered her small hand with his. "Hermione," he said, his expression solemn. "I want you to know that that wasn't my intention. I've behaved poorly, but..."

She squeezed his hand. "Lucius, s... stop. You couldn't have known. B... besides, it would probably still have m...m...m...manifested itself at some other m...m... m... ugh ... moment. By the way, the d... doctor thinks that it m...m...may be beneficial for us to c...communicate. To help m...m...m..."

"To help you to get over it," he finished for her.

"Yep." She smiled. "Will you consid..." She was interrupted by a loud bang from the doorway.

"Everyone stay still!" yelled the masked man who had just entered the café. "I have a fucking gun, and I won't think twice!" He pointed the gun at each customer in succession, then at a girl behind the counter. "Quick, give me the money, and no one gets hurt!"

It took only seconds for Lucius to gauge the situation. He stood up and cast *Confundus* even before the poor dimwit had registered the movement. Moments later, the gunman was on the floor with his hands tied behind his back, his gun abandoned. Five Muggles, freshly Obliviated and slightly dazed, looked at him in shock.

"I think someone should call the police," said Lucius. "Perhaps you, Betty," he told the girl behind the counter. "Be a dear and call the police for me." He had always wanted to use that particular phrase.

Betty snapped out of her trance and gasped, "Oh my God! Oh. My. God."

Lucius, however, had already redirected his attention. Stretching his hand to a wide-eyed Hermione, he said, "I think we'd better leave now. It's going to be unpleasant."

Hermione nodded and they hastily left the café. Steering her down the street, he could hear police sirens behind them. *Ugh*, he thought. The evening was irrevocably ruined. Not knowing what to expect, he risked a quick glance at Hermione and found her watching him with open admiration. "Wow," she said. "It was magnificent. You were absolutely magnificent back there. Bloody brilliant," she declared.

Lucius chuckled, and then said, as the realisation dawned on him, "And you just said that phrase without stuttering."

She grinned. "I did, d... d... didn't I?"

The return of her stammer disappointed him, and he muttered, "Here we go again."

"It only c...confirms m...m...m...my doctor's p...point. It's all in here." She pointed at her head. "As I was saying, w... we need to c... communicate, outside the M...."

"Outside the Ministry," he once again finished the sentence for her. "Yes, of course, I would be delighted to help you."

"Thank you," she whispered, blushing, and he noticed just how lovely she looked in the evening light. Her eyes shone enticingly, and when she licked her lips, he watched them glisten, fighting a sudden desire to trace them with his thumb. So *tempting*, he thought.

A police car with the siren on swept past them, reminding him of the unpleasant part of the night that was in store for him. "Well, thank you for a lovely evening, Hermione. Please forgive me for cutting it short, but I have to return to the Ministry and file a report," he said.

She arched her eyebrows in surprise. "Now? Why?"

"I can't afford to get in any more trouble at the moment," he explained. "Let me escort you to the nearest Apparition point. I..."

She didn't let him finish. "Trouble? What kind of trouble?" she demanded, her eyes narrowed with suspicion. He noticed that she had stopped stuttering again, but he didn't have an opportunity to tell her so, because she continued bombarding him with questions, clearly getting more agitated with every second. "Why weren't you at the meeting this morning? What happened? Did Neill threaten to fire you?"

Lucius shook his head. "No, he didn't threaten me. I was politely advised to refrain from attending the meetings for a while, because of..."

"Me," she snapped. Her nostrils flared with fury, and her curls coiled into a wild, truly lion-like mane. Tugging on his sleeve, she said, "Come on."

"Hermione, I'm perfectly capable of handling this situation myself." He tried to reason with her, although it was clear that she was unstoppable.

Fifteen minutes later, Lucius, tugged along by a very angry Hermione, entered the Aurors' office. "Harry James Potter," she shouted the moment she spotted her famous friend and swooped down on him like a hawk. "Can you please explain to me what's going on? Why is Lucius being oppressed?"

Thank goodness Potter is alone in the room, Lucius thought as he backed away into the corridor where he stood listening. *This is going to be embarrassing.*

Potter, obviously caught off-guard, began to stutter, "I ... I, Hermione, I just wanted to protect you. You said..."

"I know what I said, Harry. You asked me if I needed your help, and I specifically remember telling you that I had everything under control. What did you do, you stubborn, overbearing prat? Did you go to Kingsley?"

Lucius heard Potter drew a heavy sigh, and then Hermione spoke again, her voice much quieter this time. "Oh God, you did, didn't you?"

"I...", Potter tried to explain, but Hermione would have none of it.

"Harry, I love you, but you shouldn't have, and you know it. It's just ... not right. Please, fix it tomorrow." She emerged from the room a few moments later, her face tired. "Sorry about that," she muttered, glancing at him. "That wasn't supposed to happen."

Lucius chuckled. "Please, don't be sorry, it was highly entertaining," he said, smirking, "and you were magnificent, my dear."

"Well, thank you." She snorted.

Advice

Three Months Later

"So, does she still stutter?" Severus asked, after taking a sip of Firewhisky.

Lucius nodded. "She still struggles with that blasted 'm' every now and then. But, other than that, she's fine."

"Hmm, interesting. Do you see her often?"

"It depends. She's an overachiever, as you are well aware. Sometimes she is excessively busy for weeks." Lucius shrugged and let out a wistful sigh. "Um...", he began, then fell silent.

"Yes?" Severus prompted.

"Do you suppose I can court her properly?"

Severus gave him an incredulous look. "Why, for Salazar's sake, are you asking me? Last I checked, I wasn't considered an authority on courting or affairs of the heart."

Lucius shifted in the armchair, inwardly cursing the bloody coil that was boring a hole in his thigh. "Well, of the two of us, you are the one who has a somewhat stable relationship with a much younger witch."

"If you are referring to Miss Parkinson, I think you ought to be aware that I had no say in the matter. I was ambushed and seduced."

"I heard that," came from the bedroom, and Miss Parkinson appeared on the threshold, wearing only Severus' white shirt. "Though, to be fair, I did ambush and seduce you. Many, many times," she murmured, and completely ignoring both wizards' glares, sauntered toward Severus. Reaching him, she gracelessly plopped on his lap, which made her white shirt ride up, affording Lucius a fine view of her creamy-white thigh.

Grumbling, Severus wandlessly summoned a blanket and wrapped it around the insolent witch, his movements oozing with barely contained possessiveness. She smirked and leaned back on his chest. Curling her arm around his neck, she focused her dark-brown eyes on Lucius. "Aww," she drawled, after studying him for a while, "please, promise me you'll do things properly, with fancy dining, bouquets and diamonds." She waved her free hand. "I adore when older wizards go all ceremonial and cliché."

Lucius cleared his throat. "Miss Parkinson," he said coldly, "I don't appreciate your tone."

The sassy witch had the audacity to laugh. "Relax, Mr Malfoy, I'm just teasing." She snorted. "I love it when you turn all prickly... and those icy-grey eyes of yours. Oh my." She shuddered theatrically. "Seriously, you look so nervous and so in love. This is so cute, I think I need to pee." Jumping from Severus' lap, she sauntered off. "By the way, your Granger loves roses," she said before disappearing into the darkness of the bedroom.

Fuming, Lucius glared at Severus and hissed, "Can you at least try to control your witch?"

Severus shrugged nonchalantly. "You can try, if you're so inclined. Personally, I'm perfectly content as it is."

Lucius stood up and marched toward the Floo. He had had enough of that nonsense.

"Perhaps Granger can help you with your problem. Given that you helped her with hers, it seems only fair," Severus called after him.

"You know I don't like to talk about that," Lucius threw over his shoulder, pausing in front of the fireplace.

"Not talking about a problem doesn't make it disappear, Lucius. I hope you understand that."

Cliché

Eventually, he did everything just as Miss Parkinson had suggested. On the following Friday, he made a reservation in a fancy restaurant and bought a huge bouquet of dark-red roses. He even couldn't stop himself from buying a set of five platinum hairpins with inset emeralds. Although he hadn't any idea when, if ever, he would be able to give it to her, it still felt nice.

He collected Hermione from the office at half-past six, acknowledging to himself that she looked absolutely stunning in her simple silk dress. She had let her hair down, and he spent the majority of the dinner fantasising how heavy her curls would feel in his palms. He kept thinking that they were long enough to be wound around his hands multiple times. He didn't allow himself to continue that train of thought, because it was producing risky images in his mind, far too risky for the dinner date.

The food was excellent, and he enjoyed their conversation. Yet he couldn't stop wondering how the skin in the hollow of Hermione's neck would taste, and what kind of noises she would make if he nibbled on her earlobe. By the end of the dinner, he was gone, utterly smitten, like a boy. It was unfitting and foolish at his age, but he couldn't bring himself to care. He was just too far gone, and frankly, he didn't give a damn. He enjoyed being in love.

After the restaurant, they decided to go to Bel Ami for pastries and cappuccino, and while Lucius was paying for their order, Betty winked at him and mouthed, "Good luck." Somehow, that little gesture of support filled his heart with contentment, and he winked back at her, murmuring, "Thank you," before walking to Hermione, who was waiting for him at the table. They drank their cappuccino and ate their pastries in silence, simply staring at each other, savouring the moment. And as one little crumb stuck to Hermione's bottom lips, he finally dared to reach up and trace it with his thumb. He had wanted to do that for so long.

She caught his hand with both of hers and, flattening it against her mouth, pressed a kiss to his palm. "It's time to take me home, Lucius," she said, her lips hot against the skin of his hand. Shuddering from the subtle eroticism of her actions and stifling a groan, he only managed a shaky nod. It's been too bloody long, he thought, standing up and guiding her to the Apparition point.

The moment they appeared in his bedroom, she caught him off guard by sinking on her knees and making quick work of his fly. Her deft fingers found him painfully ready and eager for her, but Lucius still growled, "No," frightened that he wouldn't be able to stop, if she persisted.

"I want to," she whispered and without any preambles sucked him into her hot mouth. *Sometimes, the lack of subtlety is a good thing* he thought, leaning on the wall and plunging his fingers in her hair. *Oh, fuck, yes!*

It took him a while to muster his strength and force her to stop, but he managed. Eventually. Hauling her up to her feet, he attacked her lips with ferocity. Tasting the bitterness of his pre-come on her tongue, he moaned and swept her into his arms. Carrying her to his bed, he remembered that his lonely, cold bed hadn't had a woman in it for ages. *He* hadn't had a woman for ages.

In fact, he almost forgot how breathtakingly beautiful it was. How good it felt to have a velvety skin under his fingertips and tongue. How empowering it was to be able to control a soft and pliant body, to listen to that raspy breathing and those hoarse moans. He forgot the pure brilliance of that moment when a tight, wet pussy clenched and quivered around his cock, milking him of every last drop of ecstasy.

That night, he learned all that anew, and it was magnificent.

Hermione Granger, ever an overachiever, made sure it was brilliant.

Morning

He woke up to an empty bed, and his heart sank. A minute later, however, he noticed her standing at the cottage window, watching the sun rising over Malfoy Manor.

"How long since you've been there?" she asked.

"Eight years."

She nodded. "I think we'll have to go there one day," she said, watching the sun colouring the old roof of the house he had once loved so much.

"Why?" he whispered. It was painful even to think about it.

"It's your family house, Lucius." She returned to bed and twined her limbs around him, making him feel secure. "You left an enormous part of your soul there. You need it to feel whole, to be able to start living fully again."

"I'm not sure I can." He cringed at how weak he sounded, but it was the truth. He wasn't sure he would ever be able to enter his family home.

"It's all right," she murmured, nuzzling his neck. "I'll help you." There was such certainty in her voice that he thought, *Perhaps, together they might be able to do that.*

Once again, it seemed, Severus was right.

Bastard.

Fin

